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Learning to Run from Narrative Foreclosure: One Woman's Story of Aging and Physical Activity

Abstract

In this article, we construct a story of one woman's (Justine's) experience of learning to run within the context of a beginners group. Building upon existing scholarship on narrative, aging, and physical activity, this work is part of a larger ethnographic project examining subjective accounts of the physically active aging body across the life course. Concerned with often simplistically linear problems of representation, we present a messy text that represents the complex and fluid nature of Justine's embodied tale. The aim is to show the intersection of biographical (storied) identity with health behaviour choices, and to interrogate the process of challenging narrative foreclosure. By using the emerging genre of *messy text* as a creative analytic practice, we avoid prompting a single, closed, convergent reading of Justine's story. Instead, we provoke interpretation within the reader-as-witness, and expand the ways in which research on aging and physical activity has been represented.

Introduction

Not only are women less active than men in general, the disparity increases with age. Older women number among the groups with the most sedentary lifestyles, with participation rates falling significantly after the age of 45 (Dumas & Laberge, 2005; WSFF, 2007). Despite increasing participation numbers, there remains a trend for older people to withdraw from regular exercise especially if it requires considerable exertion (Kelly, 1993; O'Brian Cousins, 1998). Sedentary behaviour is further entrenched by many older people's perceptions of what the older body should and should not do, which are fuelled by their understanding of the biological processes of aging as well as pervasive ageist social and cultural attitudes, expectations, and prejudices (Blaikie, 1999; Featherstone & Hepworth, 1995; Grant, 2001). This disproportionately affects women, who continue to live longer on average and who readily report sociocultural barriers including the perception that sport and physical activity is 'unfeminine', and a lack of physical confidence to take part (WSFF, 2007).

Considering subjective, lived experience is a useful way to examine the various cultures of aging (Markula, Grant, & Denison, 2001; Phoenix & Grant, 2009). This can shed light on the ways that individual actors engage with stories of health and active aging, and the subsequent variety in meaning that aged individuals give to events in their lives such as involvement (or not) in physical activity. However, there is a distinct lack of such studies on aging and physical activity, especially in relation to gender. The majority of research in this domain has stemmed from post-positivism and has utilised quantitative methods (Grant & O'Brien Cousins, 2001; Loland, 2000). That said, a few notable exceptions that *have* used a qualitative approach to demonstrate the complex – and sometimes contradictory – impact of cultural contexts on subjective experiences of physical and psychological aging do exist (e.g., see Paulson, 2005; Poole, 2001). This research has shown how women are

1 influenced to participate in physical activity through health imperatives, physiological
2 statistics about benefits, and consumer culture with the accompanying (desirable) images of
3 youth, beauty, health and fitness (Bordo, 1990; Mutrie & Choi, 2000; Rail & Beausoleil, 2003;
4 Roy, 2008).

5 Additional research has illustrated why older women might value being physically
6 active and how they negotiate a physically active lifestyle *throughout* their lives. As Kluge
7 (2002, p. 4) wrote of her participants, "...continuity of a physically active lifestyle was not a
8 luxury these women experienced over the life course. Being physically active was affected
9 by gender socialization, ageist attitudes, and physical challenges." Subjective experiences
10 of women who age (more or less) actively through an aging, changing body *across the life*
11 *course* thus warrants attention. Following Paulson (2005), we argue that it is necessary to
12 acknowledge the importance of both cultural context and physicality – namely, ways of
13 talking about the experience of aging alongside ways of living within an aging body in a
14 particular (physical) context. A small number of scholars have used this framework to focus
15 their analyses of the subjective experience of aging and the body within the context of
16 physical activity. Their work has illuminated the contradictory nature of, on the one hand
17 traditional narratives that pathologize the aging body, and on the other, contemporary
18 imperatives to age "positively" by engaging in regular physical activity (e.g. see Griffin, 2010;
19 Kluge, 2002; O'Brien Cousins, 2000; Phoenix & Sparkes, 2006; 2007).

20 One key topic within this research has been the intersection of ageing and
21 competitive sport, in the context of Veteran or Master-level athletes: those who remain
22 competitive when over the age of 35, and well beyond (Dionigi, 2006; Kirby & Kluge, 2013;
23 Tulle, 2008). This research has shown how athletes who continue to engage in competitive
24 sport despite advancing age are often categorised as either resisting the dominant negative
25 stereotypes associated with aging and feeling empowered to live an active, healthy life, or as
26 internalizing positive aging imperatives and denying the inevitability of old age (Phoenix &
27 Smith, 2011). However, Dionigi (2006) acknowledged that participation may instead be a

1 simultaneous interaction and negotiation of these dimensions, and Tulle (2007, p. 330)
2 asserted that Veteran elite runners – whom she referred to as “atypical older social actors” –
3 can “help us redefine how we might understand embodiment throughout the life course and
4 in the later years.”

5 Against this emerging literature on women, aging, physical activity and the body, this
6 paper draws from a three-year ethnography of a non-elite women’s-only running group
7 wherein we explored participant’s lived experiences of the intersections between health,
8 aging, and physical activity. The overall research question shaping this work asked: How
9 are aging and health perceived and experienced by women who participated in the non-elite,
10 women’s-only running group?

11 **Methodology**

12 *Narrative Inquiry*

13 The methodological framework that informed this work was narrative inquiry.
14 Narrative research adheres to the philosophical assumptions of interpretivism (see Smith,
15 1989). The interpretive paradigm is distinguished from other paradigms by its relativist
16 stance, which holds that realities are multiple, intangible mental constructions that are
17 socially and experientially based (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Accordingly, as Smith (1989)
18 highlights, how we interpret peoples’ utterances and movements – the meanings that we
19 assign to the motivations, intentions, and so on of ourselves and others – becomes social
20 reality, as it is for us: it is an interpretation. Moreover, the interpretive paradigm posits that
21 the nature of knowledge is subjective and relative in the sense that there is no one ‘correct’
22 view or all-embracing ‘truth’ concerning the social world (Sparkes, 1992). Any and all
23 knowledge claims are thus partial, contingent, historical, cultural, and contextually bound. In
24 relation to narrative inquiry then, it is acknowledged that any narratives ‘captured’ are not
25 considered as being a transparent window into people’s lives as they age, but rather as an
26 *on-going* and *constitutive* part of reality (Bruner, 2002; Gubrium & Holstein, 1998). For

1 example, various forms of narrative inquiry share a commitment to viewing identities as
2 constituted through narratives, emphasizing that we are relational beings, and taking
3 seriously the storied nature of our lives and lived experiences as they unfold in time
4 (Phoenix, Smith, & Sparkes, 2010).

5 Informed by narrative inquiry, this research contributes to the emerging field within
6 the broader study of aging, known as *narrative gerontology* (see Kenyon, Bohlmeijer, &
7 Randall, 2010; Kenyon, Clark, & de Vries, 2001; Phoenix et al., 2010). One of the key
8 themes that distinguish narrative gerontology from many other fields, and which makes it
9 appealing to frame this study by, is that it conceptualizes our lives as “storied”. Human
10 beings, as Bruner (2002) argued, have two complementary modes of thought: the logical-
11 paradigmatic mode (involved with discovering laws and causal relationships) and the
12 narrative mode (involved with constituting human experience, meaning-making, and the
13 social). Research within gerontology, including that on managing decline via physical
14 exercise, has tended to examine the logical-paradigmatic mode (e.g., Mänty et al., 2009;
15 Peterson et al., 2009). However, as Bruner stressed, our understanding of human life will
16 always remain deficient if we do not also examine the narrative mode. Others agree (e.g.,
17 Frank, 2010; Freeman, 2011; Randall & McKim, 2008; Somers, 1994) and call for more
18 research directed at narrative.

19 In addition, a number of scholars (e.g., see Gergen & Gergen, 2003; Phoenix &
20 Smith, 2011; Swindle, 2003) suggest that stories are important because in some instances,
21 they can work to displace the dominant story about aging within Western society, namely the
22 “narrative of decline” (Gullette, 2004). This narrative foregrounds the physical changes
23 associated with growing old, emphasising bodily decline and deterioration often at the
24 expense of other dimensions more aligned with accumulated wisdom and growth that might
25 be associated with the learning of new skills and hobbies. Certain stories about aging and
26 physical activity, therefore, allow different relationships between body and self to emerge
27 and at times, operate to challenge the social oppression that can be experienced as an

aging body. In this regard, narrative inquiry bears within it the promise of fashioning a kind of scholarship that seeks to practice the possibilities of societal and individual transformation (Randall, 2007; Phoenix et al., 2010).

Ethnography

In addition to being underpinned by narrative inquiry, this study draws from the qualitative research tradition of interpretive ethnography (Denzin, 1997). According to O'Reilly (2012):

Ethnography is a practice that evolves in design as the study progresses; involves direct and sustained contact with human beings, in the context of their daily lives, over a prolonged period of time; draws on a family of methods, usually including participant observation and conversation; respects of the complexity of the social world; and therefore tells rich, sensitive and credible stories. (p. 3)

Ethnographers seek to generate theory through experiential education. Seeing, doing and feeling first-hand is deemed to be the best way to believing, knowing and theorizing sociologically about members of a particular culture (Atkinson, 2012; Willis & Trondman, 2000). The key assumption underpinning this research tradition is that by entering into a close and relatively prolonged interaction with people in their everyday lives (in this instance, older female runners), ethnographers can better understand the beliefs, motivations, and behaviours of those involved than they can using any other approach (Atkinson, 2012). Rather than discovering the 'truth' or 'reality' of these older, female runners, our interpretive ethnographic approach allowed insight into the multiple truths that operated in this social world – and specifically, “the stories that people tell one another about what matters to them” (Denzin, 1997, p. xv).

Methods

1 For fourteen months, [AUTHOR 1] ran alongside group members at weekly running
2 meetings led by a specific organisation operating within the South West of the United
3 Kingdom. True to the tenets of ethnography, the research design was emergent and
4 involved the use of multiple qualitative methods including formal and informal interviews,
5 photo-elicitation, auto-photography, media analysis (or, 'visual methods' – see Banks, 2007)
6 and participant observation (aided by field notes and a reflexive journal).

7 As part of the ethnography, instrumental case studies (Stake, 1995) were conducted
8 to gain a more in-depth understanding of three women's experiences: two beginners and a
9 long-term member/participant. These women were selected as cases for both their
10 uniqueness and their commonality, as they were typical of prevalent 'types' of members
11 within the running group. The case studies involved ongoing observation of the selected
12 individuals within the environment of the running group; three in-depth interviews further
13 exploring perceptions and experiences, and focusing on participants' descriptions of
14 embodied emotions and the events, memories or experiences to which they were associated
15 (running and otherwise); and an auto-photography task whereby the cases produced or
16 collected images that they felt represented their identity. These images were then used
17 during a subsequent research interview to elicit the participants' reasons for choosing and/or
18 taking those particular images, and to allow them to outline how they would like them to be
19 interpreted. The use of auto-photography in this study reflects a growing prominence of
20 visual methods more broadly within qualitative research in sport, exercise and health
21 (Phoenix, 2010a; 2010b; 2011; Rich & O'Connell, 2012). Specifically, photographs and
22 other visual data are a means by which people in everyday life can narrate experience, and
23 in this way we can come to some understanding of what those experiences mean (Harrison,
24 2004). In totality, the study involved attendance at and participation in 55 running sessions
25 of varying description and in excess of 100 hours in the field, four written notebooks filled
26 with field notes and reflexive data, over 30 hours of interview minutes, and 50+ participant-
27 generated images alongside analysis of existing media (e.g., promotional materials, website,

running magazines, etc. – see Griffin, 2010).

Data Analysis: From Story Analyst to Storyteller

Narrative analysis was used to understand the data generated from the ethnography of the women's running organization. This form of analysis refers to a collection of methods for interpreting texts (e.g., oral, written, and visual) that have in common a storied form (Riessman, 2008). Narrative analysis can be described as a technique that seeks to interpret the ways in which people perceive reality, make sense of their worlds, and perform social actions. The purpose is to see how respondents in various settings impose order on the flow of experience to make sense of events and actions in their lives (Riessman, 1993). It points to the '*in-process*' nature of interpretations and resists offering the final word on people's lives (Frank, 2004).

Two standpoints toward analysing narratives have been identified within the literature (e.g., Atkinson, 1997; Atkinson & Delamont, 2006; Bochner, 2001; Ellis, 2004; Lieblich et al., 1998; Polkinghorne, 1995; Riessman, 2008; Richardson, 2000; Smith & Sparkes, 2006): that of 'story analyst' and 'storyteller'. A story analytic technique collects, invites and generates stories, and then conducts an analysis of them (Polkinghorne, 1995). Within this approach, the stories that are told by participants (usually within the context of an interview) are considered as fundamental data for systematic, rigorous, principled analysis (Phoenix et al., 2010). This standpoint currently dominates narrative research within the field of aging and physical activity and can be recognized through the somewhat linear presentation of key themes or storylines that have been identified within narrative data (e.g., Dionigi, 2006; Tulle, 2008). Far less attention has been directed towards the analytical standpoint of storyteller, with few exceptions within the physical activity literature (see Carless & Douglas, 2009; Gilbourne, 2010; 2011; Smith, 2013), and even fewer on the topic of aging and physical activity (Douglas & Carless, 2006).

1 Similar to story analysts, storytellers collect, invite and generate stories. This
2 process is also followed by systematic, rigorous and principled analysis. In this instance –
3 and unlike much qualitative data within the field of aging and physical activity - data was
4 subjected to multiple forms of analysis. This approach is advocated by a number of
5 qualitative scholars because it allows researchers to explore different facets of the data, the
6 different kinds of order in them, and construct different versions of the social world (see
7 Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Phoenix et al., 2010; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). The ethnographic
8 case study data (including the case presented in this paper) was subjected to both a
9 categorical content analysis and a holistic form analysis (Lieblich et al., 1998). The former
10 enables thematic similarities and differences between the narratives to be provided. It is
11 valuable in its focus on the *whats* rather than the *hows* of the telling. For Reinharz (1992),
12 using this type of analysis allows questions of theory to be frequently addressed, and offers
13 the potential to illuminate what kinds of cultural resources the storyteller might have access
14 to, and how they may become lived experience through the themes presented. Meanwhile,
15 the holistic form analysis focuses on the plots and structure of a story in its completed form.

16 Having analysed the data, another difference between the standpoints of story
17 analyst versus storyteller, is that for the storyteller, the analysis itself is presented as *the*
18 *story* (Bochner, 2001; Ellis, 2004). Narrative researchers adopting this standpoint use their
19 research findings to produce written, oral, theatrical performances, and/or visual
20 representations. This requires a move away from abstract theorizing and the linear
21 representation of ‘key themes’ toward the goals of evocation, intimate involvement, and
22 engagement with stories. These forms of representing research findings are collectively
23 referred to as creative analytical practices (CAP) and are analytic in their own right (Sparkes,
24 2002). They are, as Richardson (2000) suggests, “a way of ‘knowing’—a method of
25 discovery and analysis” (p. 923). Accordingly, whereas story analysts *tell* a story,
26 storytellers aspire to *show* it and, in turn, a theory through the use of CAP: data is recast to
27 produce a story and the story is a theory. While space limitations prevent us from
28 elaborating here on what constitutes a ‘good’ story, discussions concerning this issue as well

as how to evaluate CAP have been outlined by, for example, Busanich, McGannon, & Schinke (2012), Richardson (2000), Sparkes and Smith (2009).

'Storytelling' with Messy Text

The 'messy text' is a type of CAP. It is characterized by a continuous movement throughout between description, interpretation, and voice (Clough, 1999; Denzin, 1997; Lincoln & Denzin, 1994; Marcus, 1994). Messy texts are a valuable means of conveying research findings for a number of reasons. First, according to Smith (2002), they provide a "powerful means of conveying complexity and ambiguity without prompting a single, closed, convergent reading" (p.14). Second, when compared to traditional styles of presenting qualitative research, they can heighten the reader's sense of authenticity regarding the lived experience being reported by enabling them to feel that interpretation is never finished or complete (Diversi, 1998). Third, messy texts can destabilize dominant notions of how a self-story *should* look, by resisting the presence of a plot that turns the story (and the self) into a linear, structured whole (Sermijn, Devlieger & Loots, 2008). In so doing, messy texts have the potential to capture shifting relationships existing between the body and the self as well as the corporeality of lived bodies, affecting teller, mediator and readers at an immediate and emotional level. This approach allows 'the lived border' between everyday life where people construct their realities and the social contexts that guide them in their reality making to be represented (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997).

Presenting a messy text to the reader

Following Frank (2006) and Sparkes (2007), when choosing to offer a story as the analysis and presentation of research findings, then we must allow the story to do its work, on its own, as a story. To enable this to occur, we prefer to offer a 'writerly text' (Charon, 2006) and thus operate as what Barone (2000) describes as 'artful writer-persuaders'. Within such an approach, we understand the necessity of relinquishing control over the

1 interpretations placed on a story. Instead, we invite an aesthetic reading whereby readers
2 interpret the text from their own unique vantage points, contributing their own questions-
3 answers-experiences to the story as they read it, as co-participants in the creation of
4 meaning. Our hope is that the reader might think with the story and see where it takes them.
5 For Frank (1995), thinking with stories involves allowing one's own thoughts to adopt the
6 story's immanent logic, its temporality, and its tensions and contradictions. When we think
7 with stories, he suggests, the first lesson "is not to move on once the story has been heard,
8 but to continue to live in the story, becoming in it, reflecting on who one is becoming, and
9 gradually modifying the story" (p. 159). As part of this process, the story offered below
10 opens space for dialogue, invites a range of possible meanings, and creates opportunities to
11 positively affect practice.

12 **Introducing the Case: Justine**

13 In the following messy text, we have used excerpts of fieldnotes from participant
14 observation, verbatim quotations from formal and informal interviews, and participant-
15 produced visual data to piece together one representation of the story of Justine (a
16 pseudonym). Interspersed within these snippets of primary data are segments of
17 researcher-led analytic interpretation grounded within the literature. We offer these not as
18 definitive descriptions nor analytic statements about Justine's story as it 'truly' exists, but
19 instead as hints toward possible interpretations and ways of meaning-making. Rather than
20 offering a closed interpretation, by representing our analysis in this manner we are seeking
21 to "open up conversations about how people live" as well as to "encourage multiple
22 perspectives, unsettled meanings, and plural voices" (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 435 and
23 438).

24 At the time when data collection commenced, Justine was 48 years of age.
25 Conscious of bodily changes as she progressed through the life course towards older age
26 and of the need to prepare for 'healthy aging', joining the running club represented what she
27 described as a 'turning point' in her life. She had spent the majority of her life relatively

inactive – foreclosed to any notion that she may outgrow her perceived inadequacy for physical endeavours. Justine joined the running group that we were studying via their ten-week beginner’s ‘learn-to-run’ course. [FIRST AUTHOR] observed and participated for the duration of the same ten-week course. During this time, the researchers were struck by the significant changes to Justine’s identity apparently resulting from her engagement with the running group. How does an older woman, previously foreclosed to the notion of participation in an athletic activity become ‘a runner’?. Justine’s own words demonstrate how this process was neither simple nor straightforward. Thus, while at a superficial level it may be (mistakenly) perceived as a ‘before and after’ story, our in-depth analysis of the *whats* and *hows* of her story illuminated the process of change, the inevitable delays, returns, and uncertainties that were embedded within her lived experience of becoming a runner. It is these nuances that have much to offer our understanding of the role and meaning of physical activity in the lives of older women, particularly the complexity of experiences faced by those who have primarily embodied a sedentary identity (Schwanen, Hardill, & Lucas, 2012).

Learning to run: A messy text

Something new

What’s it going to be like? What are we going to have to do? (*My stomach is churning with nerves.*)

Then she said, “Walk a little bit, run a little bit.” (*Oh! That is quite easy, really.*)

I am completely knackered. And my asthma – I can hardly breathe! (*I don’t care what they say, I don’t think this is so good for my body.*)

She said, “No, you CAN do it.” (*I guess I’ll give it a second go...*)

Nope, still hard! (*Is this for me?*)

1 I'm too old.

2 *I can't* run.

3 I'm not going to be any good at it. I've *tried* it, I can't do it. I just *can't* do it.

4

5 * * * * *

6 One way of interpreting Justine's preconceived ideas about running and about
7 ageing is through the concept of narrative foreclosure, or being 'caught' in a story that is
8 both limiting and lacks imagination (Freeman, 2000; Randall & McKim, 2008). Living with
9 negative (or unimaginative) stories about a restricted future can lead to a sense of narrative
10 foreclosure (Freeman, 2000; Phoenix & Sparkes, 2006). According to Freeman (2000),
11 narrative foreclosure relates to the degree to which the culture in which one lives fails to
12 provide adequate narrative resources for living one's life meaningfully and productively.
13 Narrative foreclosure is an eminently social phenomenon that connects to the reification of
14 cultural storylines and the tendency, on the part of many, "to internalize storylines in such a
15 way as to severely constrict their own field of narrative expression: the story goes this way,
16 not that" (Freeman, 2000, p. 83). Therefore, Freeman argues, by accepting the prevailing
17 endings to cultural stories one accepts a certain kind of narrative fate and this potentially
18 reduces the possibility of self-renewal as one grows older.

19 * * * * *

20 I tried to take up running a few times before, but never had any joy. There was something
21 about it that was appealing – I hate the gym and would much rather be outside in the fresh
22 air. And it seemed like a lot of my friends were running and enjoying it. But I was so awful –
23 I wouldn't even get down the road before I was struggling for breath. I tried and failed, tried
24 and failed, tried and failed.

1 So I thought it just wasn't for me – I couldn't work out how to do it properly. And because I
2 couldn't do it properly, I thought, well, *I can't* do it. I didn't think it was something you could
3 learn. I thought running was something you can either do or you can't. What didn't register
4 was that there's actually a right way of doing it. And I had no support, I was trying to do it all
5 myself. And of course, like a lot of things, there's more to it than what you might think – I
6 suddenly realized it's just not a case of putting a pair of shoes on and going for a run.

7 And the other thing was the age aspect. You know, I'm 48. I'm too old to take up running.
8 And that's honestly what I thought – that I'm too old to be doing this, and I'll look a right idiot.
9 I felt that running was a young people's sport. And I was too old for it. Starting something
10 when you're older is more daunting, isn't it?

11 * * * * *

12 Within the above excerpt, Justine speaks about her age and what that particular
13 'number' means she can or cannot do. However, this conception is socially constructed.
14 Laz (2003) elaborates on this, noting how age can be understood as something that is
15 accomplished or performed. She explains: "We all accomplish age; we perform our own
16 age constantly, but we also give meaning to other ages and to age in general in our actions
17 and interactions, our beliefs and words and feelings, and our social policies" (p. 506). If, as
18 Laz (2003) argues, the accomplishment of age is *social* and *collective*, then we need to
19 attend to the social settings and contexts in which people "act their age" and to the variety of
20 resources that individuals draw on, use, and/or transform in the process of accomplishment.
21 These resources can be institutional (i.e., the law, the media, medical knowledge and
22 practices). They may also be cultural (i.e., community standards and beliefs, local culture,
23 kinship networks, etc.). Lastly, they may be highly personal and potentially idiosyncratic
24 (i.e., interpersonal relationships, physical bodies, and biographies). As we "do age," says
25 Laz (2003, p. 507), "we draw on this array of resources and make use of them in complex
26 ways that are neither entirely random nor completely patterned or predictable."

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I squeeze myself into the back of the small conference room. There are more people here than I thought there would be, and they all look younger than me. And fitter, although of course that wouldn't take much! Oh, why am I here? This isn't me.

The co-founder of the running group is speaking, going over all the health benefits of running. I've always known that it's healthy, that's not the problem! Oh, what the heck. I don't want to waste my time... I wait for a break in her speech and thrust my hand up:

"Can everybody run?"

"Yes."

"I suffer from asthma, though."

"No excuse."

"Oh..."

* * * * *

Pride! Success! Triumph! Delight! Accomplishment!

* * * * *

First Author's Fieldnotes, February 23rd 2010: Following the speed session today, we gathered together and headed back at a slow jog. No matter what direction we originally head from our starting point, our return journey requires that we scale a hill. It tends to be the same hill each time – so it has become quite notorious amongst the group! It lies just before the finishing point, tantalising the tired women with its simultaneous proximity to completion and breath-sucking inclination. A seasoned runner wouldn't think twice about this hill – perhaps wouldn't even call it a hill! – but for this group, it is an adversary.

1 The first week or two, we walked up. Then, we progressed to run-walking in measured
2 spurts – using lamp posts beside the pavement as a guide, the leaders encouraged each
3 participant to slowly increase the amount they were running versus walking. This being the
4 7th week, most of the women can now run the whole hill – not quickly, mind you, and they’re
5 puffing at the top. There are still a few who struggle.

6 As per usual, when approaching the hill, I take up a position near the back of the group. T
7 (the leader) is running back there with Justine, who is quiet but looks forward
8 apprehensively. Sensing her mindset, T says, “Don’t worry – just one lamp post at a time,
9 okay?” Nodding, Justine sets off upward at a slow but steady pace. Halfway up, T turns and
10 shoots me a knowing look, gesturing toward Justine’s progress. Justine is looking down at
11 her feet, but is still going strong – no idea where she is on the hill, no pausing for breath or
12 walking breaks.

13 We’re nearing the apex now. I catch Justine’s eye and she’s still focused, breathing hard,
14 but I spot the very beginnings of a smile at the corners of her mouth. The others have all
15 stopped at the top and are clapping encouragement, cheering her on. Five more steps, and
16 she’s there. She turns and looks toward the bottom, then to T – “I didn’t have to stop! I have
17 never not had to stop!” Enthusiastically, T replies, “I know! I was wondering if you realized.
18 Amazing!! We’ll have you sprinting up those next!” Justine’s face falls. Then she laughs,
19 and looks down at the hill again – her nemesis for the past 6 weeks. “I can’t believe it,” she
20 says. “I really, truly never thought I’d be able to do that.”

21 Putting her arm around Justine’s shoulder, T addresses the group, “Well, none of you ever
22 thought you could do that, did you? And look at you now – in such a short time as well –
23 well done, ladies!”

24 * * * * *

25 Ugh, I can’t face it today. This headache... I can’t get yesterday’s run out of my head. It
26 wasn’t even meant to be hard. I’m just so tired of being at the back of the group.

1 It's...lonely. And it's that constant reminder that I'm the slowest. Still the slowest. Still the
2 odd one out.

3 * * * * *

4 "You have got a big bum, dear, haven't you? You take after me."

5 *She's been saying this to me for as long as I can remember.*

6 * * * * *

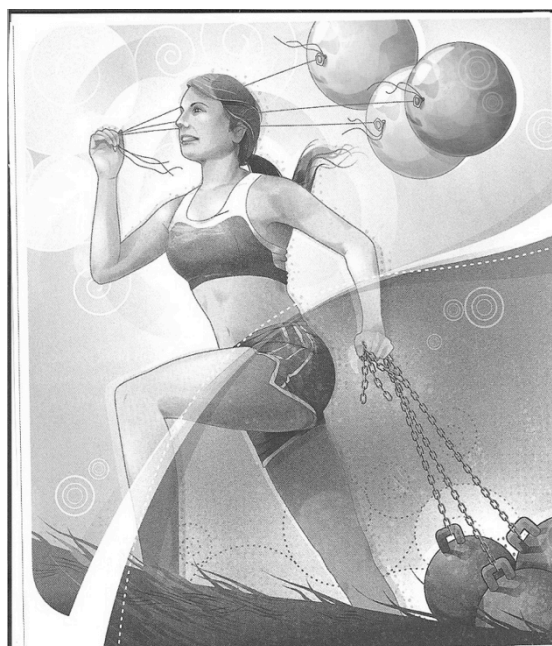
7 Nerves... Anxiety... Fear... Insecurity... Lack... Failure...

8 * * * * *

9 Let's bear in mind that at beginning of this year I couldn't run down the road without getting
10 out of breath...You know, if anybody said to me 20, 30 years ago, 'You'll be running 5k
11 races,' never mind 10k, I would have just laughed.

12 *Laughed in their face.*

13 * * * * *



14

1

Justine: “That’s Me.”

Figure 1

2

3

* * * * *

4 *“Justine can’t take part in P.E. today because of her asthma.”*

5 Mrs Smith barely looks at the note, nodding curtly at me and gesturing vaguely toward a row
6 of empty chairs at the side of the gym floor. Her attention immediately turns to capturing the
7 attention of the rest of the class, my classmates already moving about, bouncing balls and
8 with raised, excited voices.

9 I used to watch the games, as they played – wishing I was the one with flushed face, scoring
10 baskets and hearing encouragement. Now as I head towards my all-too-familiar station, I
11 reach for my book.

12 If you can’t play anyway, what’s the point?

13

* * * * *

14 *First Author’s Fieldnotes, September 13th 2011:* Helping out at this year’s local 10k this past
15 weekend, I saw Justine run past my checkpoint. It’s been a few months since our last
16 interview and she looks fantastic – all smiles, toned, and focused. I noticed that my
17 sentiments towards her have shifted dramatically from supportive, if not somewhat
18 condescending (‘Good for her!’) to admiration, even envy. She looks like a ‘proper’ runner! I
19 wrote her an email afterward to offer my congratulations.

20 Delighted, she replied almost immediately. Attaching a picture of herself post-race, she
21 wrote:

1 *It really makes me think, when I remember what I was like before to what I am now. It*
2 *almost feels surreal. My weight's better, my health's better. And it makes me realize what I*
3 *can actually do to control my health, to control my body... Because my mum suffers from*
4 *heart problems, diabetes, high blood pressure and all that stuff. So it's made me more*
5 *aware, and I see now that I can do something to prevent that for myself. I know I was on*
6 *that path.*

7 *And not just the way I look has changed. It's also the way I used to care about how I look.*
8 *Because before, I would never walk out of the front door without make-up on. I was always*
9 *very much a 'everything's got to be in place' sort of person. But, for example, now I go out*
10 *for a race with no make-up on. None at all. Normally, the thought of walking out the front*
11 *door without make-up on would be unthinkable! But now – Like on Sunday, I was out of*
12 *bed, running gear on, off down to the race, and didn't care. And I even had my photo taken*
13 *– I've attached it here.*

14 *You know, before I started running, I had a bit of an issue with cameras. Now I can't say*
15 *they're suddenly my favourite, but at the end of the day I didn't mind somebody taking a*
16 *photograph of me in my running gear, without any make-up on. It didn't faze me. And*
17 *again, to have done that even six months ago, to be quite honest, I would have been hiding*
18 *behind people, looking desperately for layers to put on. So it's absolutely fantastic, I can't*
19 *say enough about it!*

20 * * * * *

21 Attempting to '*think with*' Justine's newfound fervour and passion for running (visible
22 in the above excerpt), one possible interpretation is offered in the work of Arthur Frank
23 (1995). As he states, "Tellers of quest stories use the metaphor of initiation, implicitly and
24 explicitly...The quest narrative tells self-consciously of being transformed; undergoing
25 transformation is a significant dimension of the storyteller's responsibility" (p. 118). Quest
26 narratives are about finding (or gaining) insight, and part of the lesson is learning to see the

ordinary as already containing all the resources one needs. Inherent in quest stories are a sense of mythic heroism – wherein the protagonist tells a tale of ‘conquering’ – not by force of arms but by perseverance (Frank, 1995).

* * * * *

It’s still too big, by the way. I know that. For my body, I mean. You’d never see a picture of my body and think, “runner!” But my mum noticed that my bum had got smaller and said something about it – well, that takes a lot!

* * * * *

Little by little

As time went on, sort of four or five weeks in, my breathing actually started getting better. And rather than being like *gasp...*

...gasp...

...gasp...

...halfway through the run, I would find I was breathing a lot easier. I was recovering a lot quicker.

If I’m like this after four or five weeks, what am I going to be like after ten?

And as time got on it got better and better. And that really then gave me the push. And come the sixth, seventh week...

Yes!

And I was actually losing weight.

If it’s like this after such a short space of time, what’s it going to be like if I keep going?

* * * * *

1 The rainwater drips off my helmet as I reach under my bike to lock it up in the covered
2 shelter. Jiggling it to make sure that it is secure, I gather my things and head in for a quick
3 shower before I start work. I'm feeling energized – what a great way to start the day! So
4 much better than driving. And my breath... Wait a minute. My breath is fine. My
5 breathing... I'm not even working! But I can't remember taking – did I even take my inhaler?
6 Searching through my bag, I can picture exactly where I left it last night, sitting on the front
7 hall table in to the bowl for my keys. Well, that's certainly something. No inhaler, and no
8 heavy breathing.

9 * * * * *

10 Too old to run? Out the window.

11 Now it's, "Hey, look what I can do!! I might be 48, but look what I can do!!"

12 And when I hear someone say, "I couldn't possibly do that" –

13 I get to say, "Well, I didn't think I'd be able to do it either!"

14 * * * * *

15 The turn-around demonstrated by Justine's statements above is powerful, when
16 considered from a narrative perspective. Previous research has demonstrated the
17 prevalence of negative images that frame people's expectations of the future (Adams-Price,
18 Henley, & Hale, 1998; Phoenix & Sparkes, 2006). This negativity is consistent with
19 medicalized narratives that dominate current understandings of old age in Western society,
20 whereby the body is first and foremost signified by its systemic and systematic decay
21 (Gullette, 2004; Tulle-Winton, 2000). Stories of an undesirable old age thus have the
22 potential to operate to create the very same old age that one worries over (Moody, 1988): a
23 self-fulfilling prophecy. Indeed, Frank (1995) warns that there is a danger that people can
24 become the stories that they tell – for better, or for worse.

1 In this sense, the stories that people tell about their aging bodies (both positive and
2 negative accounts) can work to provide people with a narrative map (Pollner & Stein, 1996).
3 In defining this, Pollner and Stein (1996) propose that when seeking to grasp an unfamiliar
4 world, newcomers may seek knowledgeable or experienced others for orientation,
5 information, and advice regarding the psychosocial and physical landscape that presumably
6 awaits them in the future. In this sense, narrative maps can contribute to socialization and
7 social reproduction by confirming cultural stereotypes and forms of embodiment or,
8 alternatively, by acting to challenge and problematize these stereotypes.

9
10 * * * * *

11 Really, what I learned was how to push myself. The big difference this time was when I hit
12 those ten minutes where I felt like I wanted to give up, I learned how to push through that. A
13 little bit more, a little bit longer each time. And I know now that I *can* push through that. And
14 that is just absolutely fantastic. You know, it's learning to feel more in control. Knowing
15 what your body is capable of, and that it's a lot stronger than you think. I didn't think that my
16 body could handle it, that I might be damaging myself. How could it be good for me when it
17 felt so hard? So I used to think I could only do three miles. Now my thinking is switched to,
18 well, if I can do three, I can do four. And if I did four, I'm not far off five! So challenges are
19 still very much there, but I can frame them differently now. I can think of them more like
20 goals rather than barriers.

21 * * * * *

22 One concept with which to think about Justine's words (in the above excerpt) is that
23 of embodied knowledge, or knowledge that is held within the tissue of the body. It is a
24 somatic, physical knowing which comes from direct experience (Blackler, 1995). Sometimes
25 referred to as know-how (Brown & Duguid, 1998), this type of knowledge refers to intuitive,
26 hard to define knowledge that is largely experience based (Gendlin, 1992). Because of this,

embodied knowledge is often context dependent and personal in nature. It is difficult to communicate and deeply rooted in action, commitment, and involvement (Nonaka, 1994). Embodied knowledge is thus fundamentally practical, situated and emotionally charged, and skills held as embodied knowledge are taught through observation, imitation, and practice (Nonaka, 1994). With this in mind, we propose that Justine and others like her could be conceived to be undergoing a process of 'embodied learning', wherein the act of running gradually became embodied knowledge, with beginners learning and retaining new meanings and acquiring skills that were henceforth 'stored' in the body (Yarnal et al., 2006).

* * * * *

"Check this out" –

Justine reaches down and takes off her sock, twisting around to show me her heel:

"Oooh – Ouch."

"No, it doesn't hurt anymore. My first blister! My leader said to me, "Oh, you're a proper runner now! You've had a blister!" *[laughs]*. So I went and got proper running socks. See how they have this cushioning here? So I'm gradually learning about all of the little things like that... I mean, up until a couple months ago, I wouldn't even go and buy myself some proper tops and shorts. I did get decent running shoes, yes, but that was important. But I wouldn't have dreamt of going out, spending money on tops and shorts. Or socks. I made do with what I had. Because I thought, 'I might give it up. It might not last.' And I did half think that it might be a one-minute wonder. And give it two or three months and the novelty would wear off. But it didn't. I'm buying running magazines now. I'm happy to go into a running shop now, because I know what I need and what to ask."

* * * * *

Sharing a story

1 I saw the running group advertised through work. I think some people see the word
2 'running', and it's immediately: 'Nah. Don't do running.' You know, delete the email, throw
3 out the pamphlet, whatever. Which, put my hands up, two, three years ago, I'd have done
4 exactly the same. I would think:

5 *Running? Ugh, don't think so.*

6 But, although I've never been any good at it, I've always been interested in running. So I
7 hesitantly read it:

8 *Oh, running. Right, what have we got here?*

9 *Hmm... I've never got on well with running. I couldn't do it. I didn't enjoy it. I won't enjoy it*
10 *again.*

11 Then a couple of the girls at work, they said, 'We're going to go over and try it'.

12 *Ugh. Well, I'll go over and try it. If I don't like it first off, I'll... You know, I won't bother.*

13 * * * * *

14 The previous excerpt made us, as researchers, think about *how* individuals like
15 Justine became involved with the running group in the first instance. Images and text can
16 act to 'hail' or 'call' individuals into subject positions, or toward the acceptance, performance,
17 and embodiment of a social role – a process that Althusser (1971) defines as 'interpellation.'
18 There are, however, prerequisites that must be present in order for an individual to be
19 recruited and/or select and seek out membership, including: opportunity, motivation,
20 interest, proximity, and life circumstances (Donnelly & Young, 1988). Similarly, Butler (1997)
21 asserts that in order for interpellation to be effective, certain factors must be in place.
22 Butler's "readiness to turn" (1997, p.107) refers to a vulnerability to being interpellated
23 (Althusser, 1971; Frank, 2010; 2006) – or some openness or susceptibility to the authority
24 doing the (narrative) hailing (Griffin, 2010). This readiness or openness may be derived from

1 the promise of a certain identity, the right timing, a guilty conscience, or some or all of the
2 above.

3 From a narrative perspective, Frank (2010) imagines stories as a tacit system of
4 associations that makes particular aspects of the world seem worth attending to and
5 suggests default evaluations of what is selected. Stories thus work as people's
6 *selection/evaluation* guidance system, providing them with a guidance system that directs
7 attention within the world. Those not 'ready to turn' are interpellated into the story differently
8 (Althusser, 1971; Frank, 2010) – unlikely to engage with the story, and/or merely letting the
9 story pass on by (Frank, 2006).

10 * * * * *

11 My sister was always the sporty one. I mean, she did tennis and gymnastics and all this sort
12 of stuff. I was always the one that sort of did the office work. And was always Miss Pretty,
13 the secretary. I was always going to be the one that was going to have a family and
14 everything like that. And my sister was the sporty one, the go-getter one. But now it's gone
15 totally the opposite way. You know, she did the Race for Life with me, but that was an
16 absolute push. I was the one actually pushing her!

17 * * * * *

18 *"So what made this running group so different?" Justine pondered my question, blowing on*
19 *her tea in an effort to make it cool enough to drink:*

20 A lot of it was just being able to meet up with other people. It was actually being in a group.
21 I didn't think things like that existed. I thought if you want to run, you go out by yourself and
22 that's it. And also knowing they were beginners as well. I think there were two or three that
23 had perhaps done a bit of running before. But it was being in a group of people in exactly
24 the same situation as I was. You know, some people had never run before. Some people,
25 like me, had perhaps sort of tried it but didn't get on with it.

1 And it was very supportive. I mean, I knew for a fact I was going to be pretty much at the
2 back of the group. And I didn't come with any expectations. Um, initially, the first week or
3 two, I was like, 'Ugh, I'm the slowest. I'm always at the back of the group'. But the leader
4 still made me feel like I was part of it. She got the message across that you go at your own
5 pace. You know, you don't try to keep up with other people. But at the same time, don't try
6 to hold back from others. So it was having that encouragement. And I got a lot of
7 encouragement from the others in the group as well. Which I thought was absolutely
8 fantastic.

9 * * * * *

10 "Oh, hey Justine? Are you going to running group today?"

11 "Oh, I think I might not... I don't know that I'll bother. I'm still sore from last time, and I have a
12 lot of work that I need to get done today. And I can't stay late, 'cause I promised I'd take
13 Mum food shopping"

14 "Oh... Oh, I don't want to go by myself. Maybe I won't go either."

15 * * * * *

16 The above excerpt prompted us to consider the relational aspect of Justine's
17 experiences, or the influence that one individual's social and embodied actions have on
18 others. Human beings are a collection of stories – they accumulate stories over a lifetime,
19 and when they are given the opportunity, they select an appropriate story and tell it (Schank,
20 1990). 'Appropriateness' is determined by a variety of measures – primarily "familiarity,
21 emotion, and the potential for a shared viewpoint, and seeking approval" (Schank, 1990, p.
22 135). Understanding, in its deepest sense, depends upon shared stories. Parry and Doan
23 (1994, p. 50) write that 'shared' or 'colliding' stories are important to individual stories:
24 "People's sense of being part of a shared story is connected to the feeling that they exist
25 within some story larger than themselves." If we share the same stories, we feel a part of a

common group (Haslam et al., 2009; Jenkins, 1996; Schank, 1990; Tajfel, 1972). Moreover, when we believe that our most intimate stories are shared by our listener, beginning to share them is helpful in story 're-vision' (Parry & Doan, 1994) – or the capacity to re-story (Randall & McKim, 2008).

* * * * *

Today, I was out running by myself... But it was strange, I didn't feel alone. I passed a few other runners – two guys, one girl – and each one of them acknowledged me. You know, it's almost like I'm now part of a secret club or something, I have something in common with them and we both know it. I mean, I didn't know any of them. And I wouldn't recognize them again, I don't think. We didn't stop - the woman waved at me, one of the men smiled, and the other one just nodded in my direction. Maybe they'd do that to anyone they passed, I don't know – but I felt as though I was a part of it, a part of something.

* * * * *

Discussion

In this paper we have adopted the analytical position of storyteller to present a case study of learning to run. Despite an emerging presence within the sport and health sciences literature more broadly, this strategy has been scarcely used within the field of aging and physical activity. In addition to making a methodological contribution to an area which continues to be dominated by positivist methodologies and quantitative methods, this paper also contributes to the relatively under-theorized literature of women, aging and physical activity. It does so by considering the subjective, lived reality of aging (more or less) actively through an aging, changing body *across the life course*, and by charting the *process* of Justine's narrative journey from sedentary actor to embodied running identity. Within Justine's messy text, we signal a variety of theoretical aspects of later life physical activity participation, including: narrative foreclosure, age as an ongoing accomplishment/ performance, quest narratives, resistance to decline and ageism, narrative maps, embodied

1 knowledge, socialization / interpellation, and social (athletic) identity. Each of these
2 theoretical links provides insight into what it is like to be female / older / sedentary, and the
3 process of becoming a runner with these biographical considerations in mind.

4 Justine was chosen as an instrumental case study within the context of the running
5 group studied. This means that her experiences, while unique, were also representative of
6 many. In the larger project, our analyses showed that despite a prevalence of health
7 knowledge and awareness, participants tended to report long periods of inactivity throughout
8 their lives – citing well documented barriers to physical activity such as a lack of time and
9 care-giving responsibilities. However, a vast majority of participants also cited an utter lack
10 of confidence with respect to physical activity as they approached older age, often stemming
11 from highly influential poor early experiences. Embodying a perceived ‘non-sporting’ identity
12 for as long as they had, they were foreclosed to the idea of physical activity despite
13 simultaneously feeling pressure to participate. The alternative narratives about who *could*
14 be a runner (within the media coverage and marketing of the running group and by word of
15 mouth) ‘hailed’ participants to reconsider their foreclosed narratives, by offering a ‘fun and
16 non-competitive’ atmosphere for people ‘of all ages, sizes, and abilities’ (see first author,
17 2010). Once pushed to action and within the running group setting, these older women
18 described the process of learning about themselves and their bodies, demonstrating their
19 capacity to tell new stories about physical activity as they progressed through the life course.
20 Within this context, the value of Justine’s messy text for understanding aging and physical
21 activity in the lives of older women who have previously been inactive is outlined below.

22 Firstly, such an approach demonstrates that identity is not about an ascribed status;
23 rather, “identity is an ongoing project, most commonly an ongoing narrative project”
24 (Goodson, 1998, p. 4). We acknowledge that Justine’s story has undeniable suggestions of
25 linearity; of an identity shift framed as a before versus after transition, oftentimes by Justine
26 herself. In a sense, telling this dominant story, for example in a retrospective interview,
27 would be telling the easiest story: a journey from A to B. However, what is absent within

1 such a telling is the process and fluidity of change, of learning, and of growth. This
2 patterning of experiences is often overlooked within research on aging in general (Schwanen
3 et al., 2011), and aging and physical activity in particular. As Hörschelman (2011) points
4 out, research using a life-course framework has the tendency to privilege order and
5 continuity over delays, return and uncertainty, and more attention is needed on the ruptures
6 and discontinuities within the life course. One way of achieving this is to consider the life
7 course in terms of its folds, wherein the encountered narratives, ideas, technologies,
8 landscapes, the lives of other people, and so forth are folded and refolded into a person's
9 embodied subjectivity (Hörschelman, 2011; Schwanen et al., 2012; Sumara & Davis, 1998).
10 As a result, linear representations of life courses as trajectories or pathways are traded for
11 more complex understandings, and uncertainty can be articulated.

12 By adopting the analytical standpoint of storyteller, we glimpse Justine's story as it
13 was told, re-told, and in the process of it being re-written. Represented as a messy text, we
14 can make visible where and how Justine's story expands in places due to a widening of her
15 available narrative resources (Frank, 2010). For example, her experience of learning to run
16 in the running group instigated a re-thinking of her own attitudes towards aging and age-
17 appropriate physical activity, what it means to be and who can be a runner. This involved
18 her 'trying on' stories that seemingly fit with these newly available identities, including a
19 running identity (i.e., blisters, magazines), and alternative narratives of femininity (i.e., less
20 make-up and concern for appearance). The first step toward widening one's narrative
21 resources is learning what content makes up what stories. Learning how to tell them, and
22 being brave enough to tell them, is another step altogether. We argue that this latter step
23 remains ongoing for Justine – and is highly dependent on context and audience. Engaging
24 critically with available stories and depicted identities therein, rather than adopting and
25 embodying them unquestioningly, is a further step (see below: concept of narrative literacy).
26 Arguably, this is a journey that Justine is still very much on (as we all are!).

1 Secondly, stories often become real to participants in the telling of them (Frank,
2 2006). Only upon articulating their stories did many participants recognize the narratives
3 that they were drawing from and upon. For example, upon feeding back our interpretation of
4 her story to Justine, she was astonished at how much her early experiences with physical
5 activity affected her current feelings and attitudes. Although we were using her own words, it
6 was not until she ‘heard’ her story ‘re-told’ (and inevitably re-interpreted) that she was able to
7 really recognize certain elements of her story. Responding to this interaction, we propose
8 the term ‘*narrative literacy*’. Akin to media literacy, we define narrative literacy as
9 narrators/storytellers becoming aware of both the stories they tell and how these are
10 connected to stories that they are surrounded by. Within our work, and going forward, we
11 reiterate Frank’s (2012, p. 50) question: “How might people’s lives change if they heard their
12 own stories with enhanced reflective awareness and if they heard others’ stories with a more
13 generous sense of what makes these stories viable representations of the lives those
14 storytellers live?” Enhanced narrative literacy, then, entails not only a greater
15 personal/individual awareness of the stories one is ‘caught up in’, but also the diversity of
16 alternative stories that circulate and are told by others. As Frank (2010, p.41) writes:

17 Stories have the capacity to arouse people’s imaginations; they make the unseen not
18 only visible but compelling. Through imagination, stories arouse emotions... The
19 capacity of stories is to arouse people’s imaginations concerning how their lives
20 might have been different, and the possibilities that still lie open to them.

21 People’s level of narrative literacy influences their capacity to exercise their narrative ‘art’,
22 and this is affected by how much they use or misuse their imagination (Frank, 2012).
23 Stimulating imagination starts with a critical examination of the stories we tell and why, the
24 stories we want to tell, and – most importantly – the stories that others are telling, whether
25 we want to hear them or not. Thus, this paper illustrates the value of narrative literacy for
26 enabling women to see themselves within creative analytic practices, one example of which
27 being a messy text.

Our hope is that this contribution opens up space for CAP within aging and physical activity scholarship, as well as underlines the importance of a biographical, life course approach to understanding women's participation in physical activity over time. Justine's story expands upon current knowledge of aging and physical activity in the lives of older women by illustrating how for some, the physical activity arena is unfamiliar and formidable territory. Taking up a new activity at an advanced age means that we inevitably bring to it a lifetime of assumptions, preconceptions, and insecurities. For policy and/or program developers and providers, in turn, this has implications for how we might be more sensitive to the biographical background of each potential participant going forward rather than targeting discrete, commonly reported barriers to participation.

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